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SUBJECT: CODEL COLEMAN DISCUSSES 2008 OUTLOOK WITH HAKIM

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Rob Waller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) On January 5 CODEL Coleman (Sens. Norm Coleman (R-MN), John Cornyn (R-TX), Johnny Isakson (R-GA)) met with ISCI Leader Abd al-Aziz Al-Hakim. MPs Hadi al-Amri and Redha Taki also attended the meeting. Hakim opened by saying 2007 ended on a better note than it began, citing a "20-25%" decrease in terrorist attacks and improvements in construction, employment, and service delivery, and improved relations with neighboring countries. Coleman responded by saying, "Thank you for your leadership and resolve in bringing together different people and ISCI and Badr support for the cause of Iraqi unity," but noted significant challenges remain. Asked what was needed from the U.S., Hakim listed: training and equipping Iraqi Security Forces (ISF); Iraq's exit from Chapter VII; support for the political process; and strengthening Iraq's relations with neighboring countries.

Security Update: Blarney Hills of Baghdad

¶2. (C) Cornyn asked if American troops should leave on an arbitrary date or at a time when the ISF is ready to assume security responsibility. Hakim agreed this was a "central question," explaining that in 2003, the Iraqi army was not ready to assume responsibility and Hakim and others advocated using militias to provide stability. He referred to the success of the Anbar Awakening and the ISF in Karbala and said "the greatest result has come from Iraqi security forces." Coleman said "Americans will be fighting al-Qaeda forever," but noted that Americans cannot stay forever in Iraq. Hakim maintained they were many positive developments and Amri chimed in that "Iraq is much better off than Ireland."

Coleman grills on legislation

¶3. (C) On the subject of de-Ba'athification legislation, Hakim did not predict when the law would pass but noted that "we all want this" and "all Iraqis must learn to live together." Warming to the topic of reconciliation, Hakim discussed a series of recent conferences in Najaf that focused on freedom and democracy and were attended by Iraqis from all sects. Isakson mentioned the need for foreign investment, and Hakim explained that the COR investment committee "was busy fighting terrorism" but that it could now focus its attention on drafting investment legislation.

¶4. (C) Comment: Hakim's positive comments on the Anbar Awakening echo similar statements made recently to Iraqi press and represent a change from his past public opposition to tribal engagement. During a January 3 lecture at a religious conference in Najaf, Hakim called for signing an agreement with the U.S. related to the presence of American forces in Iraq. End Comment.

15. (U) CODEL Coleman did not have an opportunity to clear this cable before their departure.

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